



AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE SELF-HELP HOUSING

ONE OF THREE PROGRAMS AIDING SEASONAL FARM LABOR

A proposal for housing agricultural labor in the San Joaquin Valley,
utilizing the experience of successful projects
in other states and countries.

Background and Experience

Tulare County, along with the other farming counties of the San Joaquin Valley in California, is credited by the American Council to Improve Our Neighborhoods with being one of the nation's worst slums. In terms of agricultural income, Tulare County ranks second in the nation; yet, one-third of the county's citizens live in substandard houses.

The reason this condition exists, and will continue to exist, has a simple historical basis. When the "dust-bowlers" swarmed into the state there was insufficient available housing. Sometimes, because the old car just wouldn't go another mile, and sometimes just because the urge to have a home was so great, these migrants began to squat on unproductive land. The first home might have been the old car, or a tent. This was expanded with a pilfered billboard, or some scrap lumber. A few landowners soon realized that their submarginal land could be sold at a handsome profit to these home-hungry farm laborers. Condemned houses in the path of post-war highway expansion stimulated the rapid growth of these substandard colonies. In the last few years, colonies have been constructed from the cabins of condemned farm labor camps. And so the blight has spread.

On every street of these colonies, there is evidence that the owners are not content with their houses. This is manifested by a coat of paint, a picket fence, or an added room. The materials for these improvements must be bought out of current wages since conventional building credit is denied these people. They have their home only because the developers of these substandard tracts are willing to sell on land contract. Under this system there is no equity until the final payment is made. Many a would-be home owner has lost everything because he couldn't keep up the payments during the months of winter unemployment.

The house a man lives in is usually a symbol of what he thinks of himself. If he can't have the kind of house he wants, he may come to think of himself in terms of the quality of the house he lives in. Thus, substandard houses help produce a substandard social structure. While many folks may think that the migrant is homeless, or lives in a shack from choice, those who have studied the problem find that the most commonly expressed desire of farm workers is for a "place to call my own." When the worker talks about his hoped-for house, it is in terms of a neat, well-constructed home with the necessary plumbing, wiring, and cooling system. A lawn, flowers, vegetable garden, fruit trees, and chickens are always a part of the dream.

What prevents the farm laborer from having adequate housing? Low wages and a short work year make him ineligible for conventional mortgages. He wants to live in the communities where his fellow workers live. Since these colonies are substandard, the conventional lending agencies will not make building loans. Also, low wages prevent the family from saving the necessary down payment for conventional loans. In short, the farm labor family does not receive the same help from state and federal agencies in securing housing that others receive.

Farm labor has one definite asset when it comes to acquiring a home. During the slack seasons of "big winter" and "little winter" the laborer has time that he can devote to

the construction of a house. This is the time when many of the resourceful ones have built or added to their homes. Frequently neighbors share their labor. Without building knowledge or skills these attempts at home building often result in housing far below minimum standards.

In other parts of the world where housing has been a problem, groups of people have been able to get the shelter they need by the self-help housing technique. While all such attempts have not been equally successful, notable examples are the projects in Nova Scotia; Puerto Rico; Sweden; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Pennncraft, Pennsylvania. In these projects both economic problems of house building and social problems of community development have been met.

The successful self-help projects have had a similar organizational pattern. A group of families needing housing was brought together under the leadership of a skilled builder. They studied the problem for several months, becoming acquainted with the financial problems of building and the obligations of home ownership. During the period of study the group planned their houses and communities; they learned to live with the personality differences of each member of the group. In every case the building loan was secured from special sources and in a few cases long term financing was secured from government or commercial agencies.

Agricultural Labor Self-help Project

A pilot housing project will be located near one of the 65 settlements of seasonal farm laborers in Tulare County. The American Friends Service Committee has helped three such communities obtain domestic water systems. One of these systems could be extended to serve the pilot project, thus cutting down on the initial costs of the subdivision.

The successful formula used elsewhere will be followed. Each applicant will be carefully screened to determine his dependability and likelihood of staying with the house until completed. The building loan will be secured by a note for the estimated number of hours of construction labor. Each man will agree to exchange hours with others in the group and careful records will be kept of the hours he works on his own and other houses. All of the houses in the unit will progress together, so that all will be completed within a few days of each other.

The project will be under the direction of a skilled builder, who will instruct the members in the necessary building skills, and see to it that workmanship comes up to standard. Prefabrication techniques will be used, wherever possible, thus making the most efficient use of the unskilled labor.

Several well-qualified persons in the fields of city planning and architecture have offered to give their assistance in the design and planning of a self-help project in the Valley. The plans will conform to the standards established by government and private lending agencies.

Federal housing legislation passed in 1961 opens the way for farm laborers to get mortgage insurance and direct construction loans for home building. This new program of the government can be of real value in helping to solve many of the problems of inadequate housing for farm workers. It is encouraging that the agencies involved in making these loan funds available have indicated great interest and desire to set up administrative procedures that are practical. Nevertheless, it may take time to develop a workable plan since it may be necessary to utilize unorthodox procedures in this pioneer attempt to solve this difficult housing problem.

A self-help housing project financed in part with federal funds may, therefore, involve delay. Recognizing the possible difficulties in getting financing worked out with government agencies, three years are being allowed for the completion of the first unit of 20 houses.

BUDGET for 20 houses

Salary and expenses of project manager	
and construction supervisor for three years	\$24,000
Land Loan Revolving Fund	16,000
Contingency Fund	16,000
Total	\$56,000

Since the government funds are available as construction loans (up to 33 yrs. at 4%), these funds do not show in the above budget. It is expected that approximately \$4000 will be borrowed for each home. All negotiations for loans will be direct between the home builder and the appropriate governmental agency. A prerequisite to any construction loan is that the borrower own the land in which the house is to be built. Thus, the plan and budget include AFSC revolving loan funds for land. The repayment schedule to the AFSC would be worked out by the group as part of its discipline.

The contingency fund is in the budget to take care of the unexpected: inflation, time delays, changes in subdivision laws, building codes, etc.

Should the direct loans from the government not become available, an AFSC capital loan fund of \$50,000 for land and construction costs would be necessary to build each unit of 10 houses.

Succeeding projects.

The initial project will be limited to 20 homes. It will have to solve many problems which succeeding groups will not need to work through. Therefore, although the size and time requirements of the pilot effort necessitate subsidizing the building construction supervisor, it is felt that future projects, which could be larger in size and developed more quickly, will be able to absorb this as a construction cost.

Secondary objectives

In addition to the prime purpose of helping farm labor secure good housing, there are a number of secondary results to the project. These include: showing commercial lenders that these persons are reasonable risks, developing a pattern for providing adequate housing for all low-income groups, encouraging amendments to the National Housing Act to provide for the elimination of rural slums, stimulating "community" among a people for whom migratory living has built up barriers around the family unit, creating a sense of money management that might lead to the formation of cooperatives and credit unions, developing potential leadership for responsible roles in the community, and teaching building skills, thereby increasing the employability of the home builder.

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Contributed funds support the community development projects and the farm labor cooperatives. Contributions to sustain these projects are needed and welcome. Funds earmarked for self-help housing will make possible the expansion of this project or supplement the revolving loan fund, should this become necessary.

1/2/62

AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

FARM LABOR COOPERATIVES

Farmers, and especially those of California who raise perishable crops, are constantly plagued by the fear that the crop will spoil in the fields for want of hands to harvest it.

While the grower lives in fear of a shortage of help, the farm laborer is plagued to earn enough to provide his family with the bare minimum of shelter, clothing, and food.

These factors persist in spite of the fact that growers have gone to other countries for supplemental labor and that the California farm laborer receives one of the highest hourly wages of any farm laborer in the nation.

Growers have attempted to supply their labor needs through the mass importation of labor from China, Japan, the Philippines and Mexico.

During the 1930's, and again in the early 1950's, some factions of the farm labor force expressed their desire for improved conditions through organizational campaigns that proved abortive.

Currently we find growers engaged in an extensive publicity campaign to explain and justify the importation of Mexican Nationals, while on the other hand organized labor is attempting to discredit the program and to organize the California seasonal farm laborer.

The attention of the consuming public has been drawn to this problem by such dramatic presentations as Grapes of Wrath, such pedantic studies as the one made at the direction of Governor Earl Warren in 1951, and sensational cases of human suffering such as at Mendota and Firebaugh a few years ago.

Consequently, religious and philanthropic organizations have been drawn to the problem because of the sometimes appalling conditions which exist. The American Friends Service Committee has been working with the farm laborer of Tulare County for five years. The emphasis of the work has been upon community development in the villages where the laborers live. This effort has not been without a measure of success, as is evidenced by community improvement associations at Teviston, Goshen and Beacon; the Teviston and Goshen Community Service Districts to provide domestic water, enforcement of building codes, and adult education classes. These measures can be viewed only as palliative. They do bring relief to limited members but all of the efforts are directed to helping the farm laborer to gain confidence in himself by becoming a responsible member of an improving community. Attempts have been made to develop cottage-type industry without success.

The Outdoor Education Program, initiated by the AFSC and financed the first year by the Rosenberg Foundation, successfully focused the attention of the school people on the problems of the farm laborer, while at the same time providing a channel for emphasis on science and conservation education in the elementary curriculum.

The ever constant desire of the laborer for year-round employment at adequate wages, and the desire of growers for a dependable labor force, can, the AFSC believes, best be achieved if a means of communication can be developed between the two groups. This could result in a sense of mutual responsibility and interdependence. The American Friends Service Committee staff has discussed the problem at considerable length with growers, laborers, and union leaders. All agree that an experiment in communications would be desirable.

The plan, as it has been conceived, calls for the organization of farm labor cooperatives. The purpose of the cooperative would be to obtain year-round employment for its members at the best wages and under the best working conditions possible, and to provide adequate and dependable labor to growers. The working agreement might follow the principles used in the Mexican Nationals program.* A little experimentation should lead to an agreement applicable to local conditions.

The two methods most generally used in obtaining farm employment in the San Joaquin Valley are through a contractor, or by a family or group negotiating directly with the grower. Usually the laborers prefer the latter since it means a little higher wage. However, by working for a contractor fewer days are lost in job hunting and this is sometimes thought to compensate for the contractor's fee, which may range from 10% to 25% of wages. In some crops it is almost impossible to get work except through contractors.

Social Security laws preclude farm laborers from full participation in old-age, survivors, and disability insurance. Laborers are coming to realize the value of this program. Through the cooperative, almost complete participation could be provided since the cooperative would be the employer rather than many growers and contractors. Thus, greater benefits would be assured to the worker and his family.

Currently there is no unemployment compensation plan for farm labor. This is an area of recognized need which could be experimented with on a voluntary basis.

Whenever the concept of a labor cooperative is discussed, some laborer always asks about the possibility of group accident and hospitalization insurance. This is just one more of the advantages that might be worked out for the membership.

Frequently in the past the Congress of the United States, the Legislature of the State of California, and other public bodies have held hearings on the problems of farm labor. Growers, organized non-farm labor, religious-philanthropic groups have had their spokesmen at such hearings. Conspicuously absent from such hearings is the voice of farm labor. The cooperative could provide a voice for its membership.

*Such as: Work under written contract
Labor's right to elect its own representatives
Guarantee of minimum hours of gainful employment
Non-discrimination in employment
High standard of workmen's compensation
Written records of payroll calculations
Belief that a day's labor is worthy of subsistence
Safe and adequate transportation to the area of employment provided
by the employer
Tools and equipment for work furnished by the employer
Workers' responsibility under contract

Several groups of laborers have expressed interest in such an organization. Many laborers have asked to be part of a cooperative crew. But very few of them comprehend what constitutes a democratically operated organization. Their past experience has been to work at the will of someone else, with very little if any participation in the decision-making process. Competition for jobs is an ever present fact; therefore, the concept of cooperation is foreign to most laborers.

Education in democracy will be a major requisite for the development of the plan. In a world where one's experience has been limited to accepting or rejecting, much must be learned about the spirit of cooperation and the techniques of decision making by the democratic process. The elementary rules of parliamentary procedure are virtually unknown.

Circumstances have made crop specialists of most farm laborers. One of the major tasks before a farm labor cooperative will be that of training the members in a variety of skills so as to increase their employability. In a very real sense the cooperative will be a medium for vocational training.

There is no doubt on the part of the Farm Labor Committee of the American Friends Service Committee that careful manpower planning could greatly increase the productivity of farm labor, eliminate much of the worry of the grower, and generally increase the standard of living of the community.

The American Friends Service Committee has placed one staff member in the field to assist the farm laborers in the organization of labor cooperatives and in implementing negotiations leading to contracts. He will also develop vocational training services and be responsible for exploring the possibilities of the "fringe" benefits mentioned above. A sum of \$6000 has been set aside for the first year of this experiment in agricultural labor-management relations. Other expenses than salary are seen but in the first year it is expected that this employed manager, who among other responsibilities assumes the role of contractor, will be recompensed out of fees.

At this point the American Friends Service Committee cannot predict with confidence how this program can become self-supporting and expand. It is reasonable to expect that the AFSC employee's work in forming a labor cooperative will result in the co-op selecting its own full or part-time manager, be he a new person or the AFSC staff person. It is also reasonable to assume that fees paid by the grower for services will support the manager after the co-op is a going concern. Conceivably a manager could serve more than one co-op of 30 to 100 members each.

Russell Curtis, the Farm Labor Cooperative Secretary, began work on this project in October of 1960. The idea has been well received by growers and laborers alike. There is every reason to believe that the first cooperative crew will be working under contract during the coming year.

If this idea proves to be a significant contribution to labor-grower relations in agriculture, the AFSC will want to service other groups in other areas.

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Other contributed funds support the community development projects employing Bard McAllister. A self-help housing project is a third major program the AFSC wishes to undertake with farm labor. Contributions are needed and welcome.